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SUBJECT: BULGARIAN GOVERNMENT DROPS "SILENT DIPLOMACY;"
PUBLIC/POLITICIANS STEP UP OUTRAGE AGAINST LIBYA

Ref: (A) Tripoli 749, (B) Sofia 01683

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The death sentences passed by a Tripoli court on five Bulgarian nurses Dec. 19 triggered mounting outrage in Bulgaria as politicians, NGOs, the public and the press lashed out at Libya for holding a deeply politicized trial and called for international support. Over the course of December 19-20, Bulgarian officials further hardened their stance, blasting Qadhafi's regime for basically making a mockery of justice. Others accused Tripoli of using the nurses as racketeering tools for gaining financial payout, and holding them hostage as bargaining chips in Tripoli's power games with the West. Politicians and media declared "the end of the silent diplomacy era" and agreed that only increased pressure on Libya can save the medics. The President, the Prime Minister and the Speaker of Parliament sent a joint address to the leaders of EU and NATO states, calling for their intervention in the case. Civic groups organized rallies, politicians seem to be out-doing each other in their indignation, and business called for a boycott of Libya. To highlight the gravity of the issue, Bulgaria is mulling curbing celebrations for its EU accession on New Year's eve. END SUMMARY

12. (U) Bulgarian officials have further hardened their stance on the Libyan HIV case in the two days following the Tripoli Criminal Court decision to confirm the death sentences of the five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor accused of deliberately infecting more than 400 Libyan children with HIV. (Ref. A, B) In an unprecedented move, President Georgi Parvanov, Parliament Speaker Georgi Pirinski and PM Sergei Stanishev sent a joint letter to the leaders of the EU and NATO member states, the UN and the Council of Europe, calling for their intervention to save the medics. They note the legal omissions made by the Libyan Court, its refusal to consider the opinions of leading scientists on HIV and AIDs, and the violations of the nurses' human rights. "For eight years now, the Bulgarian nurses and the Palestinian doctor have been denied justice. For eight years now, they have been subjected to physical and psychological coercion and have now reached the limit of human endurance," Bulgaria's top statesmen said. Noting that Bulgaria will join the EU on January 1, the three leaders called for a common stand on the case, and urged "more active support" for the release of the innocent nurses.

13. (U) President Parvanov talked late Dec. 19 to his French Counterpart President Jacques Chirac. According to a press release by the Bulgarian presidency, Chirac confirmed his conviction that the Bulgarian nurses condemned in Libya are innocent. Chirac expressed France's absolute solidarity and confirmed the readiness of all EU member-states, including his country, to continue the efforts for achieving a just solution to the case of the Bulgarian medical nurses.

14. (U) Foreign Minister Ivailo Kalfin, talking to CNN, also called for international support to save the medics, jailed in Libya since 1999. He said Bulgaria and the international community should do their best to resolve the case and persuade Libya that the legal mechanisms for solving this case have not been exhausted. His deputy, Feim Chaushev, who met with the five nurses in Tripoli on Dec. 20, told Bulgarian media that they felt abandoned and extremely exhausted. He said the nurses feared that if they are released the Libyans may infect them with the HIV virus out of revenge.

15. (U) Parliament Speaker Pirinski vowed that Bulgarian MPs would use any opportunity to raise the issue about the nurses' fate in parliamentary assemblies and parliamentary forums, urging other countries to take a more categorical stand. He was backed by ex-President Petar Stoyanov, the current leader of the main opposition center-right group and a former advocate of restrained actions and silent diplomacy, who said Bulgaria "should adopt a much more categorical and firm tone in respect to Qadhafi's regime." "The time for diplomacy is over, there is nothing to lose now," he said.

16. (U) Chief Prosecutor Boris Velchev reiterated that Bulgaria would press charges against those who have tortured the nurses while in Libyan prison, and ordered the National Investigation Service to start working on the case. He admitted, however, that work on this case will be a challenge since the investigators, at least for now, won't be able to question either the nurses or the Libyan officers.

LIBYA "HOLDS THE NURSES HOSTAGE", "RACKETEERS FOR MONEY"

17. (U) Not surprisingly, the bluntest wording came from Sofia Mayor Boiko Borissov, a populist who owes his persistent high approval ratings largely to his plain and direct language. Borissov, who launched his GERB political party only few weeks ago, said the "nurses have been kidnapped" and "held as hostages by Libya." "They

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are being used as a tool for blackmailing the international community for money," Borissov said, and called for "total isolation of Libya." He blasted the Bulgarian authorities for their unsuccessful efforts to resolve the case by using silent diplomacy, and called on the government to cancel celebrations for Bulgaria's entry into the EU. "We don't want to downplay the fact that we are joining the large European family; we wish to alert the Euro-Atlantic community that it is of the utmost importance that the government, politicians, all institutions and civil society do the impossible to help our compatriots," his GERB party said in a statement. The Mayor said that on Christmas Eve, Sofia will switch off street lights and decorations for five minutes as a sign of compassion with the five medics. Former Foreign Minister Solomon Passy cancelled a private party for his 50th birthday.

18. (U) Georgi Gatev, one of the medics' lawyers, also referred to the nurses as "hostages" and was categorical that the Libyan courts could not be trusted and "international pressure was the only solution." The Bulgarian medics are hostages of Libya's power games with the West and are being "used as bargaining chips for gaining monetary compensation," he said. Bulgarian analysts following Libya's domestic affairs commented on the political sensitivity of the issue in the Arab state as Qadhafi struggled to appease the infected children's families and avoid troubles in the Benghazi area where he has traditionally enjoyed less popularity.

BULGARIANS SHOW SOLIDARITY WITH NURSES

19. (U) The shrillest and most bizarre proposal on how to resolve the issue came from extreme nationalist Volen Siderov who called for arresting five Libyan nationals in Bulgaria and exchanging them for the nurses. Siderov urged the government to immediately halt diplomatic ties with Libya and blasted the U.S. and the EU for failing to help Bulgaria on the matter despite repeated pledges to do so. Ataka supporters protested late Dec. 19 in front of the

Libyan embassy in Sofia. Doctors and nurses from hospitals across the country protested against the sentences of their colleagues. Protest rallies were held in many places in Bulgaria, although attendance was moderate.

¶10. (U) The Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry condemned the death sentences. "Under the circumstances, the Chamber cannot continue encouraging Bulgarian businesses to broaden their contacts with Libya because the Chamber cannot assure Bulgarian companies that their safety in Libya is guaranteed," the Chamber said. The Confederation of Independent Trade Unions, Bulgaria's biggest trade union, urged Bulgarians working in Libya to leave the country. "Their labor and human rights will find no protection there," the union said in a statement. The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee expressed indignation as the nurses' death sentences were confirmed in Libya and called on the Libyan authorities to release the innocent victims.

PRESS HAILS BULGARIAN OFFICIALS' HARDENED STANCE

¶11. (U) The press hailed Sofia's hardened stance on Libya and also wrote that international actions now seemed the only solution. "Bulgaria Assumes Firmer Position toward Libya after Sentences," "Shall We Let Them Be Killed?", "We Will Fight Until the End" were some of the front-page headlines Dec. 20. "Only tough measures on the part of the U.S. and Europe will startle Libya," the most widely circulated newspaper Trud daily wrote. "The solution is in a sharp, quick and open attack. On Jan. 1, as a fully-fledged EU member, Bulgaria should demand a European economic and diplomatic blockade of Libya." "The era of silent diplomacy is over," declared the 24 Chasa daily, saying the government should not have wasted so much time trying to appease Libya. Commentators called on Bulgaria's allies -- the EU and the U.S. -- to increase the pressure on Tripoli. But some noted that while trying to help Bulgaria, both the EU and the U.S. have started to revive ties with Libya due to their economic interests in the oil-rich Arab state.

¶12. (U) Local media reported extensively on Secretary Rice's Dec. 19 meeting with Foreign Minister Kalfin. All local media quoted the Embassy statement, released Dec. 20, in which the Ambassador expressed deep disappointment about the verdict of the Libyan Court and vowed the U.S. would continue to work for the medics' release. Local media also noted that Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov had appealed for the medics' release, and European Parliament President Josep Borell called on the Libyan authorities to reconsider the death verdict. Several media outlets have unfavorably compared tough European and Russian reactions to U.S. statements.

¶13. (SBU) COMMENT: Bulgaria's stance on the case has continued to harden since the confirmation of the death sentences, with even moderate politicians increasingly using harsh language to blast

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Libya. Much of it comes from emotion and frustration, not tactical political/diplomatic considerations. Issues such as Libya's politicized trial and the duress of the five nurses, that until recently had been off-limits for official statements on the case, are now exploited freely in Sofia's mounting campaign for international intervention. Although some of the maneuvering is clearly political one-upsmanship, the Bulgarian leaders want to send a clear signal to Libya, the EU and the world about how seriously Bulgaria takes this issue. We can expect greater Bulgarian activism, especially in the EU, in 2007 if the issue drags on. END COMMENT
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